



DECISION MEMO

Wildfire Tree Planting – North Fork 2



USDA Forest Service, Northern Region
Nez Perce – Clearwater National Forest
North Fork Ranger District
Clearwater County, Idaho

I. Background

I have decided to authorize the Wildfire Tree Planting – North Fork 2 project on the Nez Perce-Clearwater National Forests located in Township 36 North, Range 7 East, Section 6 and T41N, R9E, Section 30 (Boise Meridian). See maps below.

The project is located in the Snow Creek and Snowy Summit wildfires of 2015 on the North Fork Ranger District. Along with other post-fire recovery and restoration efforts, the Nez Perce-Clearwater National Forests looked for opportunities to recover the economic value, where appropriate, to offset the costs of restoration in fire-affected areas. A rapid assessment process used a coarse filter / fine filter approach to eliminate burned areas from consideration for salvage. 'Coarse filters' included designated Wilderness, Idaho Roadless Rule areas, Wild and Scenic River areas, Research Natural Areas, Riparian Habitat Conservation Areas, landslide-prone areas, etc. The 'Fine filter' approach then evaluated the remaining burned areas using a restoration-based framework. Among other criteria, areas of 50% or greater mortality that would not be economically feasible, due to timber not meeting merchantability standards, accessibility, etc., were dropped for proposed salvage. (The area proposed for the Wildfire Tree Planting – North Fork 2 project met this criteria.) These areas would be restored through natural regeneration and planting native tree species where planting is needed.

II. Purpose and Need

Relying on natural regeneration in the proposed project area would result in stands dominated primarily by grand fir and Douglas fir, species susceptible to root disease and stem decay, and likely to have low survival rates. Western white pine, western larch and ponderosa pine are more resistant to root disease and stem decay and being shade intolerant species tend to be more fire resistant and longer lived than shade tolerant species. By planting these species, the project would help reestablish and promote the diversity of the forested component in the burned area. In turn, this would improve the overall health, structure and vigor of the stands within the larger wildfire-impacted landscape over the long term.

The project would meet the requirements of the National Forest Management Act which states that *"All forested lands in the National Forest System shall be maintained in appropriate forest cover with species of trees, degree of stocking, rate of growth, and conditions of stand designed to secure maximum benefits of multiple use sustained yield management in accordance with land management plans."*

Project Design / Equipment: The North Fork Ranger District will plant seedlings of western white pine, western larch and ponderosa pine in stands burned in the Snow Creek and Snowy Summit wildfires of 2015. Tree planting will occur in stands without timber salvage operations. The project will plant trees on approximately 58 acres (2 stands; see Table below).

Stands for the Wildfire Tree Planting – North Fork 2 Project

Township	Range	Section	Activity Unit, Forest, District, & Stand No.	Acres	County	Wildfire
36N	7E	6	050119080015	36	Clearwater	Snowy Summit
41N	9E	30	050309030138	22	Clearwater	Snow Creek
Total Acres				58		

The seedlings will be one year-old stock planted on an 10 x 10 foot spacing at approximately 400 trees per acre. Planting will be done using hand tools by a contract crew with oversight by Forest Service personnel. No mechanical equipment will be used. There will be no other ground disturbing activities associated with the proposed action. Access to the sites will only be by existing roads. The project does not change access restrictions. During wet conditions driving full size vehicles on roads will be limited and ATVs or walking used to access the stands instead to minimize damage to roads.

Surveys would be conducted after the first and third growing seasons to monitor the survival and condition of the planted trees.

Project Implementation: The work will occur in late April to mid-May of 2017. The project will take approximately two weeks to complete, depending on weather.

Design Criteria include, but are not limited to:

- No roads or landings will be constructed.
- No mechanical equipment will be used for planting activities.
- Use of motorized equipment (such as All Terrain Vehicles), other than hand held equipment such as power saws, will not be permitted off designated roads in the project areas.
- Experienced Silviculture personnel shall be involved in designing vegetation treatments.

III. Rationale for Decision and Reasons for Categorically Excluding the Decision

Based on information in this document and the project record, I have determined this project is not significant in either context or intensity (40 CFR 1508.27), that no extraordinary circumstances affecting resource conditions exist (36 CFR 220.6), that this project may be categorically excluded from documentation in an EA or EIS, and that it meets all the criteria outlined in 36 CFR 220.6(d)(11): *Post-fire rehabilitation activities, not to exceed 4,200 acres (such as tree planting, fence replacement, habitat restoration...), to repair or improve lands unlikely to recover to a management approved condition from wildland fire damage, or to repair or replace minor facilities damaged by fire.*

The rationale for my decision is based on: (1) the proposed action fully meeting the criteria for Categorical Exclusions, (2) the proposed action meeting the purpose and need, (3) the findings related to extraordinary circumstances, (4) the project's consistency with laws and regulations, (5) the on-the-ground review and discussion with District resource specialists, and (6) my review of the Biological Assessments (BA), Biological Evaluations (BE), and specialists' reports.

Finding of the Absence of Extraordinary Circumstances to Resource Conditions

Based on the findings for resource conditions described below, I have determined that no extraordinary circumstances are associated with my decision. Forest Service direction at 36 CFR 220.6(b) describes the resource conditions that should be considered in determining whether extraordinary circumstance related to the proposed action warrant further analysis and documentation in an EIS or EA.

Additionally, 36 CFR 220.6(b) states, *"The mere presence of one of more of these resource conditions does not preclude use of a categorical exclusion. It is the existence of a cause-effect relationship between a proposed action and the potential effect on these resource conditions and if such a relationship exists, the degree of the potential effect of a proposed action on these resource conditions that determines whether extraordinary circumstances exist."*

1. Federally listed threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitat, species proposed for Federal listing or proposed critical habitat or Forest Service sensitive species.

The Interdisciplinary Team (IDT) Botanist has determined the proposed action will have "no effect" to species listed as federally threatened or endangered or their habitats. Constance's bittercress and evergreen kittentail, R1 Sensitive species, may be present in the tree planting units. Both of these species have likely increased after the wildfires. Individual plants may be mechanically harmed during planting, but there are no concerns for species viability.

The IDT Wildlife Biologist determined the proposed action will have "no effect" to Canada lynx and "no jeopardy" to North American wolverine or their habitats: Replanting within the Snow Creek fire is outside any LAU and does not impact lynx habitat. The replanting units within the Snowy Summit fire lie within LAU 38; however, current conditions do not represent suitable lynx habitat as a result of burn severity. There is no wolverine habitat associated with the project.

A "may adversely impact individuals or habitat" determination was made for black-backed woodpecker, fisher, fringed, long-eared and long-legged myotis, gray wolf, Townsend's big-eared bat, and Western (boreal) toad. Overall, the effects would be minor and of short duration and would not result in a loss of viability, nor cause a trend towards federal listing or a loss of species viability range wide.

The IDT Fish Biologist determined the proposed action would have "no effect" on bull trout, steelhead trout, and fall chinook salmon, federally threatened species, because the species and designated critical habitat do not occur within the project area. The biologist also determined the proposed action would have "no impact" on R1 Sensitive species or their habitats since the species do not occur within the project area.

Based on the above assessment, no effects exist that will cause an incremental cumulative effect and no extraordinary circumstances were identified for these resources. For the complete analyses, see the Fishery, Wildlife and Botany Biological Assessments and Evaluations and specialists' reports in the project record.

2. Floodplains, wetlands or municipal watersheds.

No direct or indirect significant, adverse effects to floodplains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds are proposed or expected for this project. No adverse effects to streams and no measureable increase in sediment would occur (Hand-planting, vehicle travel on existing roads only). Overall net benefits to watershed, soil and aquatic resources are expected with this project due to accelerated restoration of canopy and evapotranspiration processes, rooting strength and organic matter inputs (fine and coarse woody material, litter, soil organic matter).

No cumulative significant, adverse effects to floodplains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds are proposed or expected for this project. Cumulative effects would be most noticeable at the site scale (if they occur), becoming progressively less discernible at the sub-watershed, watershed, and sub-basin scales. Given the low degree of anticipated site-level effects, cumulative effects are expected to be negligible.

The proposed project is consistent with all applicable State and Federal water quality laws for water resources. The activities are also consistent with soil and water standards in the Clearwater National Forest Plan, including the PACFISH amendment.

Based on this analysis, no extraordinary circumstances were identified regarding the effects to water quality of streams within the area; downstream waters; or resources in floodplains, wetlands, and municipal watersheds; thereby complying with EO 11988, EO 11990, and FSH 1909.15 Chapter 31.2.2.

3. Congressionally designated areas, such as Wilderness, Wilderness Study Areas or National Recreation Areas.

The project area is not located in any congressionally designated area, and therefore, no extraordinary circumstances were identified to these resources.

4. Inventoried Roadless areas or potential wilderness areas.

The Snow Creek planting unit (22 acres; T41N, R9E, Section 30; see Map 2, Snow Creek Fire below) is located in the Mallard-Larkins Inventoried Roadless Area, Backcountry Restoration Idaho Roadless Management classification. An IRA Briefing Paper for the proposal was submitted to the IRA Commission. In an email dated 12/6/2016, the commission stated they had no concerns with the proposal.

The Snow Creek planting unit is also located in the Mallard-Larkins Recommended Wilderness. The boundaries for the MLRW and MLIRA are congruent. Effects to the Recommended Wilderness would be the same as those for the Inventoried Roadless Area.

5. Research Natural Areas.

The proposed activities are not within or adjacent to any Research Natural Areas.

6. American Indians and Alaska native religious or cultural sites.

The Forest Cultural Resource Specialist determined the project has little likelihood to adversely affect cultural properties, assuming such properties were present. Therefore, no extraordinary circumstances were identified to native religious or cultural sites.

7. Archaeological sites or historical properties or areas.

The Idaho State Historic Preservation Officer, or the Forest Archaeologist via the use of the North Idaho Programmatic Agreement, has determined that no archaeological or historic property will be adversely affected by this project. Therefore, no extraordinary circumstances were identified to these resources.

IV. Interested and Affected Agencies, Organizations, and Persons Contacted

The proposed action – tree planting in two burn areas – is considered limited in context and intensity, and therefore scoping was conducted internally on the Nez Perce-Clearwater National Forests. The Small NEPA Interdisciplinary Team was scoped on April 6, 2017 with no significant effects or extraordinary circumstances identified.

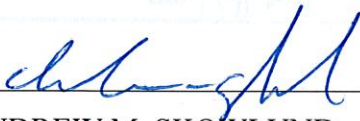
V. Findings Required by other Laws

Based on my review of the actions associated with this project, I find that the Wildfire Tree Planting – North Fork 2 Project is consistent with applicable Federal, state and local laws and regulations, including the standards and guidelines contained in the 1987 Clearwater National Forest Plan, as amended, as required by the National Forest Management Act of 1976.

VI. Contact Person

Questions regarding this decision should be sent to Jeff Chynoweth, Small NEPA Team Planner, c/o Nez Perce – Clearwater Supervisor's Office, 903 Third Street, Kamiah, Idaho 83536 or by telephone to (208) 935-4260 or FAX at (208) 935-4275 during business hours (M-F, excluding Federal holidays, 7:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., PST).

VII. Signature of Deciding Officer



ANDREW M. SKOWLUND
District Ranger
North Fork Ranger District

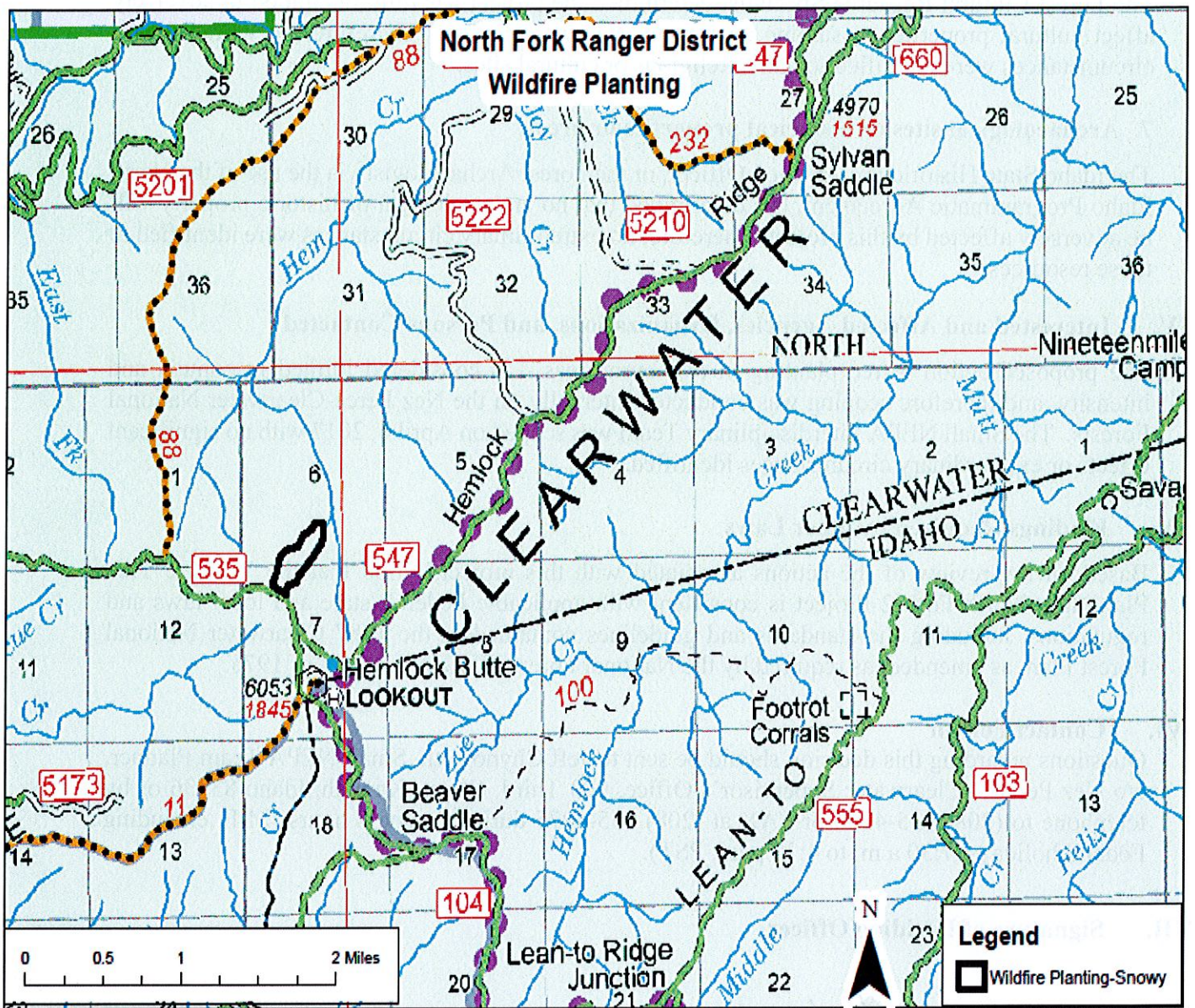


Date

cc: Clare Brick

Enclosures (2): Maps

Map 1: Wildfire Tree Planting – North Fork 2 / Snowy Summit Fire



Map 2: Wildfire Tree Planting – North Fork 2 / Snow Creek Fire

